



Fig. 1: Piero della Francesca, Story of Sheba and Solomon, c. 1460, Arezzo, S. Francesco

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Piero della Francesca, liminologist

The True Cross story, the story of the incessant resurfacing of a tree in human life, was a medieval confabulation, loosely but not strictly derived from more formal typological theology. Typology is a biblical hermeneutics that produces human history as a symmetrical patterning around the central axis of the Incarnation. In typological or figural history, the events narrated by the Old Testament are incomplete until they are fulfilled by their counterparts in the New. The life of Christ divides all events into before and after, unfulfilled and fulfilled, shadow and substance. The legend of the True Cross is a kind of literalization of a typological schema. In typology, there is an inner homology between type and antitype that the Bible-reader apprehends as a conceptual rhyme, perhaps is even made to see as a pictorial rhyme. The physical Cross in the True Cross legend stands for whatever it is that links events across history in this mysterious way. In this story the deep-structural homology *literally* resurfaces, in physical form; the homology is not merely intelligible, it is visible, solid. The Legend of the True Cross is meta-typological; it enacts, literalizes, the theological idea of typological identity.

The True Cross legend is a series of contests between those who recognize and those who misrecognize the Cross, repeated on either side of the temporal divide of the Crucifixion itself. The true, fulfilled event that structures the legend is the one moment when the Cross took its true form and was fully and indubitably recognized for what it is. At that moment the Cross was perceived not merely as an engine of Roman justice, but as the instrument of human salvation. The central event of the True Cross legend is the apprehension of the meaning of the Crucifixion by some of its original witnesses. The content of the figural relationship is a psychological phenomenon: recognition. The shadows or types of the singular recognition are the multiple recognitions of the Cross as it surfaces and resurfaces in history in un-crosslike, hard-to-recognize form. The wood of the Cross surfaced not only *before* the one true surfacing, as an orthodox typology might have it, but also *after* it; for after the Crucifixion the Cross went back underground and fell into danger of being forgotten. The Cross needed to be recognized again and again, by Empress Helena, by Emperor Heraclius, by every Christian. The Cross is permanently contested and there is no progress toward stability.

Piero della Francesca's True Cross cycle in S. Francesco at Arezzo, complete at the very latest by 1466, never pictures the complete event that orders all the others, the recognition of the True Cross at the Crucifixion. Only the shadows of that event, past and future, are projected onto the walls of the chancel. The Crucified on the Cross was apparently present at S. Francesco, but in another medium: in the form of a painted wooden panel suspended from the triumphal arch, very likely the thirteenth-century panel remounted in the church's chancel in the 1980s (*fig. 2*).¹ But the recognizers are not depicted on this panel. That panel, which is conceptually more a sculpture than a painting, renders the event but only as a symbol. It makes no space for onlookers, or only the most minimal space, for there is just enough room at the very bottom for a suppliant St. Francis himself. The painted Crucifix instead expects the real surrounding space, the church-space, to serve as the context of its event. It proposes the real persons present in the church as the recognizers of the True Cross. In recreating that initial recognition of Christ's divinity and of the Cross-wood's non-ordinariness, the real onlookers in Arezzo participate in the one true event whose past and future repetitions are projected on the walls above them. The historical events pictured by Piero crisscross above the heads of celebrants and devout, beholders and witnesses, who are themselves caught up in a present-tense drama of recognition, a permanent testing. In many churches, present-tense beholders were expected to recreate the initial event by worshipping a relic of the Cross, a splinter or chip, another surfacing of the polymorphous wood that would rhyme with the five or more surfacings pictured on the walls of S. Francesco. Recognition was rehearsed by a distinguishing of true relic from false. The explosion of the Cross into an infinity of fragments strewn across space at once put an end to the cycle described by the True Cross legend, and ensured that the recognition drama would be re-enacted forever. The cult of Cross-relics effectively "published" the Cross, but with the result that recognition – discrimination between true and false fragments – had become extremely challenging, even more so than it had been for Helena, who only had to choose among three crosses.

At Arezzo, however, there was no relic of the Cross. The recognition drama re-enacted in the chancel of S. Francesco embraced instead the liturgy itself, the acceptance of the Host as a relic of the body of Christ, and the acknowledgement of the identity of the Crucified as depicted on the painted, Cross-shaped panel.

Piero has exploded the strict linear narrative of True Cross recognitions into a complex spatial back-and-forth that moves across levels of reality, across the barrier between reality and representation. In *Die Räume der Maler*, in a discussion of embedded narratives in fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting, Wolfgang Kemp described just such a compounding and heterodoxization of typology.² In Rogier van der Weyden's *Altar of John the Baptist* (c. 1455), the figures move and act in architectural spaces that speak back to them through tiny sculptures (*fig. 3*). Sculpted scenes on archivolt weaves a typological tent over their heads. Such a painting diagrams the real-life situation at Arezzo, where celebrants rehearse recognition scenes within a painted environment. Piero's installation, meanwhile, realizes the structure of the scene contained within Rogier's fiction.



Fig. 2: Arezzo, S. Francesco, chancel

Rogier copies the idea of the ontological frame enclosing an artwork into his own picture. He literalizes the concept of the frame as a real-life frame, a stone arch, inside his fictional scene. Piero, who is not painting a retable but animating an entire chancel, is working with a different, more permeable conception of frame. The frame



Fig. 3: Rogier van der Weyden, Beheading of John the Baptist, c. 1455, Berlin, Staatliche Museen

he copies into his frescoes is the permeable, liminal frame that allows celebrants and onlookers to re-enact recognition dramas. The frames figured inside his pictorial fictions are accordingly less stable and more ambiguous than Rogier's.

Piero della Francesca converted the True Cross legend into an occasion for reflecting on the double-character of frames as isolaters and connectors. He was interested in frames as *thresholds*.

Frames create episodes, and at the same time make possible the comparison of those singular events, creating patterns and breaking down singularity. The typological reading of history also isolates events and persons from their historical contexts and remakes them as dense emblems. Erich Auerbach wrote of the typological prayers uttered by characters in the *Chanson de Roland* that they isolated the historical episodes of the Old Testament and set them side by side like the figures "on the sarcophagi of late antiquity." In these prayers, the Old Testament events "no longer have any reality, they have only signification."³ The stories of saints or heroes in the middle ages, in the *Chanson de Roland* itself and elsewhere, took over from the typological interpretations this parcelling tendency: "to remove [events] from their historical context, to isolate the individual fragments, to force them into a fixed frame, and, within it, to make them impressive gesturally, so that they appear as exemplary, as models, as significant, and to leave all 'the rest' in abeyance." The extreme density gave these emblematic scenes a "visual plasticity." The single scene took on a simplified, emphatic solemnity.⁴ In this way the typological tradition, grafted onto an oral, paratactic narrative which in antiquity would have read as distinctly "low," produced the first "elevated style" of the middle ages.

Piero's cycle is not so much the *result* of this process as a *representation* of it. Piero took up the theme of the True Cross, a kind of typological fable, in order to find his way back to an elevated style; in order to recapitulate the process described by Auerbach of an artificial, arbitrary isolation of the events of history supporting an impressive visual plasticity in narration.

The painter could achieve such an effective fragmentation of history much more easily than a poet, for the painter's narration must always parcel out the flow of time into framed, static scenes. By Piero della Francesca's time, Giotto had a natural advantage over his contemporary Dante. But Giotto's solemnity and density must have seemed a remote, almost unattainable achievement. To recover it Piero reactivated the device of typology and the story of the True Cross, a subject that had already been imagined on mural scale by Agnolo Gaddi in the chancel of S. Croce in Florence (late 1380s) and by Cenni di Francesco in S. Francesco at Volterra (1410).⁵

Piero redistributes the typological hinge-mechanism within human life, with the effect that each figure is suspended between psychological realism and emblematic status. The figures are as if narcotized, sleepwalking, which is close to what Auerbach was describing in the *Chanson de Roland*, with the difference that Piero, feeling himself once-removed from epic, had to try to recover this condition. The typological schema allowed Piero to invest bodies with emblematic status. His characters take on the heavy, readily memorable quality of the characters produced by what Walter Ong

called the “noetic economy” of oral cultures.⁶ The *content* of the impression of solemn depth in Piero is this state of semi-belonging to a schema. Instead of dramatizing his stories by distinguishing sharply between the aware and the unaware, the recognizers and the misrecognizers, he de-dramatizes by distributing obliviousness and noetic ponderousness evenly among all characters. No one in his paintings seems *fully* aware of the meaning of the shuttling movement of the Cross in and out of history. The Cross is like a strange-shaped three-dimensional object partially intruding, at strange angles, into a purely two-dimensional existence. Some few believe they recognize it on the basis of its constantly changing cross-section, most cannot. The career and meaning of the tree is the same no matter what; salvational history unfolds because it does; the individual responses to the re-appearitions of the tree-wood are at best semi-free, suggesting that salvational history is a mechanism, not a contingency of mere biography or psychology.

The cycle is linked to the Netherlandish panels also by their shared consciousness of an art historical *décalage* or belatedness, a sense of their own place in a history of picture-making. All these mid-century paintings were trying to hold tradition together. Piero della Francesca and Rogier van der Weyden tried to bind tradition by developing the device of simultaneous or continuous narrative, the representation of chronologically distinct events within the same unified picture field, involving impossible doublings of individuals. Four of the six large fields that flank Piero's chancel employ continuous narrative. Continuous narrative, an ancient convention with some medieval afterlife, might well have been banished by Giotto's phenomenalist revolution. Giotto used it only once in the Arena Chapel, in the *Birth of the Virgin*, as Kemp points out.⁷ And yet over the course of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the device was gradually reactivated, not as a resistance to rational, one-point perspective but seemingly as its complement. Fra Angelico, Filippo Lippi, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Botticelli all worked with continuous narrative. This puzzling development is often ignored by historians of Quattrocento art. For Lew Andrews, there is no paradox: perspective, he argues, created a space that the narrative art could finally exploit.⁸

But isn't it possible that fifteenth-century painters re-invented continuous narrative in order to recover what they imagined to be the simplicity and force of the old cultic painting? Continuous narrative would then be explicable as a pseudo-archaism. It is relatively easy to accept such a thesis when thinking of archaizers like Giovanni di Paolo, the Osservanza Master, or Hans Memling, but why not with Lippi or Piero as well? Piero, too, dismantles the frames between events but leaves the overall picture field intact, creating the strongest dissonances, emblems of the mystical interwovenness of history which is the overall theme of the cycle.

In activating an archaic-seeming device, Piero acknowledges the historical predicament of the Christian artist, so far removed from his models. By what authority does a painter produce a Christian image? The painter is not an *auctor*, a founder, rather he takes as a starting point other paintings. How does the artist mystify such a creation? The modern painting generated by the unsystematic processes of adjustment and recombination will always seem dispersed, unintegrated, and doubtful, and is



Fig. 4: Sheba Recognizing the True Cross

always comparing itself to the simplest images, like the infinitely dense beam of wood, the aniconic idol, before which Sheba kneels and prays (*fig. 4*).

Piero combines models both remote and near, but in the quoting they are levelled. In the True Cross cycle he cites a figure by the fourth-century sculptor Skopas,⁹ the colossal Dioscuri in Rome, a Trajanic frieze in the Arch of Constantine, Trajan's

Column, and a Roman sarcophagus known already to Lorenzo Ghiberti. He knows the mosaics at S. Vitale at Ravenna and the early medieval frescoes and mosaics in Rome; he knows the Trecento painters by heart; he knows battle scenes by Pisanello; he knows the Burgundian medal portraits of Constantine and Heraclius, spurious antiquities; he knows the nocturnes in northern book illumination.¹⁰ He looks everywhere, and closely. At San Sepolcro, in his *Resurrection*, he copies the Resurrection polyptych by Niccolò di Segna (c. 1346–48) in the Cathedral, to the point of reproducing the spatial confusion in the pile of sleeping soldiers.¹¹ This is not only to say that Piero was a more deliberate citationist than Giotto. Nor is it only to say that the historical sources are brought to a common level inside Piero's pictures, for that too is obvious. Rather, it is to say that for Piero every source had the *same* value, whether pagan or Christian, old or very old. They were each one of them a source that he had chosen out of the infinity of possible sources. He chose each source because it shared with all the others some quality which cannot be named except as that quality which recommended itself to Piero della Francesca. That quality of form, whatever it is, guarantees that the content of the chain of images, whatever that content might be, remains the same even if the forms appear to be shifting and metamorphosing, as if accidentally. It is like the wood of the cross itself whose dimensions and proportions, according to the Golden Legend, magically change to fit every circumstance.

Piero is the one who recognizes the sources. He singles them out from the total history of art as the Christian recognizes the True Cross from among all the bits of wood in the world. Because he knows too much about the sources to believe that they really do have equal rights, he treats them *as if* they all had the same value. To be an artist of the "Renaissance", perhaps, is precisely to pretend that there is no problem. The Renaissance was an attempt to recover a state of naiveté about sources, to recover the situation of the artist before it became a predicament.

The mid-Quattrocento painter activates the fragments of an art history, fulfilling their potential by casting them in new performances. The sources, like the Cross made of decay-resistant wood, had never died. They only needed to be activated by present-tense recognitions and performances. Artistic authorship was a matter of recognizing and reading well the written prophecies (citation creates the sources preserved on wall and panel and in stone *as* prophecies). The history of the true image is an embedded thread that threads through the history of art, hard to recognize. Sheba directed Solomon's attention to this thread by writing him a letter, at least in one of the versions offered by Jacopo da Voragine: "In the *Scholastic History*, however, we read that the Queen of Sheba saw the wood in Solomon's forest house, and when she returned home, she sent word to Solomon that a certain man was to hang upon that wood, and by this man's death the kingdom of the Jews would be destroyed."¹² Instead of telling Solomon *viva voce* what she had understood about the wood, she waited until she was home again and then sent a message. It is as if she did not want to be caught up in the reaction to the message; or as if she felt that a written or posted message, because more elaborately mediated, would carry additional authority. Jacopo

da Voragine, meanwhile, represents this writerly condition by offering sacred history, the basis for liturgy, as a collation of multiple, competing written sources. Instead of presenting the lives of the saints straightforwardly, in a way that a simple preacher could simply use, Jacopo lays out all the alternatives. The Gospel of Nicodemus says such and such, Jacopo reports; Johannes Belet fills in such a detail; Augustine assures us of this, Gregory of Tours of that, the *Historia Tripartita* of that. Ambrosius reports that Helena was the humble daughter of an innkeeper, but others say she was the daughter of Clohelis, a British king. A Greek story tells us about the angel who gave Seth a branch of the Tree of Life, as pictured by Piero; but Jacopo warns that the account is apocryphal, unattested in any of the better sources, and so leaves it to the reader to judge whether it be true. Like Sheba, Jacopo da Voragine offers the truth delivered by letter, with the difference that Solomon at least received a letter with a reliable return address, "Sheba," whereas Jacopo spreads out a whole overlapping array of partially contradictory letters, written by authorities of differing degrees of reliability and anonymity, and expects the reader to pick up the right thread of truth. The preachers who were charged with translating Jacopo's collation back into an oral medium had to choose a single thread from the array, hoping thereby to re-invest the stories with original consequence and authority.

Piero della Francesca, in combining far-fetched source-material into a single story braced by plastic rhymes, was attempting a comparable preacherly re-oralization.¹³ He was attempting to convince his beholders that he had made the right preacherly selection from the multiple pasts that art history, in its confusing, writerly way, had delivered. Some of his sources came with return addresses, but others did not, for only then, in Piero's time, were artists and beholders becoming aware of the incompleteness of their art historical knowledge.

Piero did not choose to represent the postal version of Sheba's warning to Solomon. His fresco implies that she is about to tell him in person. Piero felt his own age, which was still Jacopo's age, to be too readerly, that is, too much entangled in the quandary of multiple sources who could not be interrogated and could not speak back. He probably preferred Jacopo's story of the Jew Judas who identified the True Cross for Helena on the basis of an oral chain, transmitting information that his own father had received from his father (Jacopo himself had doubted the tale as chronologically unrealistic).¹⁴

Wolfgang Kemp writes ingeniously about the embedded narratives in Jan van Eyck, for example the Old Testament scenes incised on the floor in the Washington *Annunciation*.¹⁵ The Eyckian embedded narratives point to the overall problem of painting's sources by prying the modern work apart from its source and depositing or consigning the source to the built environment. In such a painting, the scenes figured in the fictional built environment stand for the art historical sources, while the fictional characters – Virgin, Gabriel – stand for the modern artwork that depends on those sources. The binarism sources/artwork is allegorized inside the fiction as the opposition between the constructed and the real. Modern painting lives allegorically inside itself as the world of living flesh; the stone surroundings symbolize the dead source-material

that living painting mines. Eyckian embedding converts the built environment into a screen for a second, less real layer of reality. Consigning the pictorial source-material to the built surroundings was a way of indicating that the art historical past could function as a *type* of the art historical present. Art is the antitype or completion of art history.¹⁶ Every built setting is prefabricated, and therefore automatically historical, as Kemp points out,¹⁷ that is why this device is so quickly legible and why it works so well. Piero did something similar when he consigned scenes of the Life of the Virgin and the Passion not to a building, but to the embroidered surface of the cape worn by his *St. Augustine* in Lisbon, a soft, micro-architectural environment.¹⁸

In the Arezzo cycle, however, Piero dissolves this clear partitioning by pulling the second, less real reality back into the first. His citations of art historical sources (pagan, Franciscan) are not consigned to a stone environment, to an architectural display-board, but are blended into the primary narrative. In fact, they provide the formal scaffolding for that narrative. Piero effaces the frontier between the source and its poetic second life in art, between type and antitype.

Some characters within his cycle recognize the wood for what it is, others fail to. But none of Piero's characters can recognize the embedded art historical citations from within the fiction, as van Eyck or van der Weyden's characters would if only they turned their gazes aside or above. The characters inside Piero's fictions cannot see the patterns created by the substitutions and switchings, the pattern of art history.

So we have two possible ways of representing this patterning in painting, on the one hand through framed citations, a spolia-like layering of representations within representations, on the other hand through unframed citations, creating recognition problems. The second device raises at least the theoretical possibility of an abolition of difference and a reversion to an ahistorical, permanent artistic present, the possibility of an art that simply delivers the real. These are two ways of figuring the relationship between an art historical past and an art historical present. One way corresponds to written transmission, which tends to preserve a hierarchy of voices (Jacopo da Voragine records that Eusebius wrote that Helena said...), the other to oral transmission, which tends to collapse distinct voices into the present-tense of a performance (the Jew Judas re-creates the eyewitness authority of his grandfather by ventriloquizing his handed-down testimony). Oral transmission re-creates the living voice with each performance, whereas the written source remains dead and deaf even as it is being read. In pulling the second level of pictorial reality into the first, and allowing the past and the present to seep into one another on the picture surface, Piero is trying to recover the authenticity of orality, something like what Walter Ong called – with reference, for example, to radio and television – “secondary orality.” He signals his approach by dismantling the frames that would isolate his scenes and preserve unity of time and place; and by fashioning patterns of internal mirrorings and doublings that work across the pictorial face of time and knit history together.

The middle register of the right-hand wall of the chapel couples the narration of the biblical report of the world-historical confrontation between the powerful Jewish king and a skeptical Arabian queen (1 Kings 10) with the Christian myth of Sheba's



Fig. 5: Meeting of Sheba and Solomon

precocious recognition of the wood of the Cross. Sheba's embassy to Solomon's Jerusalem is the rehearsal for the Empress Helena's stubborn quest for the True Cross more than twelve centuries later. In the left-hand scene, described in the Golden Legend, the queen dismounts, recognizing as a sacred substance the hewn beam that serves as a footbridge. Jacopo da Voragine reports that Solomon had tried to build with this beam, which had been fashioned from the tree that sprang from Adam's

grave, but had given up in frustration when the wood continually altered its size and shape, refusing to participate in architecture. He had thrown it across a stream as a bridge. Sheba kneels before the beam and prays and her shadow falls directly on the wood.

In the second, later scene, the biblically described meeting at Solomon's palace, Sheba bends over the king's offered hand (*fig. 5*). The Gentile Queen, like the oriental kings who would recognize the infant Jesus, is transfigured and humbled by her premonition; she now wears no crown. The Arabian Queen and the Magi *are* able to recognize what is alien to them; it is the Jews who are misplaced in time, at once premature (still awaiting fulfillment) and belated (slow to recognize it when it comes). All this will be repeated by the tale of Helena, herself a converted Gentile queen. Sheba will warn proud Solomon – either now or later, by letter – that this wood will bring about the downfall of the Jews. The second scene is not sealed off from the earlier by any frame (*fig. 1*). The hills on the horizon on the left disappear behind the palace on the right, indicating that the two scenes share the same space-time, and yet Sheba and her female attendants appear in it twice. The outdoor scene is staged in illogical, immediate proximity to the palace. The fluted column at the left corner of the palace serves as a virtual frame, but even this device is undermined by the edges of the columns hiding perspectively behind it, pulling the front column out of its meta-fictional role as frame and back inside the representation. The quasi-frame of the column is ineffectual, for it is unable to close off its scenes and create autonomous pictorial worlds. This is made clear by the rhymes and doublings that weave the two side-by-side scenes together. The structural model for this scene, it would seem, was Fra Angelico's *St. Stephen Preaching* and *St. Stephen Addressing the Sanhedrin* in the Cappella Niccolina in the Vatican (1447–48), where the foreshortened edge of the post-and-lintel construction on the right serves as an internal quasi-frame allowing St. Stephen to appear twice within the same perspectival space.¹⁹

Piero's iconographic model was not the texts, Bible and Golden Legend, which decline to describe the meeting, but rather the bronze relief by Lorenzo Ghiberti, the concluding scene on the East Door of the Baptistery in Florence, of the 1430s.²⁰ Whereas in Ghiberti the two monarchs meet as symmetrical equals, here their encounter is multiply decentered: the Queen bends over Solomon's hand; they meet in the center of the right half of the fresco, but they are not centered within the bay, nor are they quite centered against the porphyry panel on the wall behind; their meeting is witnessed by a symmetrical ring of attendants, but that symmetry is imperfect compared to the more powerful visual rhymes that link the interior group as a whole to the event in the landscape outside and to the right. For the woman in green on the right, the bending Queen, and the attendant between them are mirrored exactly by the group on the left in front of the True Cross beam, generating yet another center for the picture as a whole, a symbolically meaningless center (unless the man who occupies that center axis and looks straight out at us is a self-portrait).

So much for the mystical repetitions that thread through time like a tale multiply told, levelling art historical sources and obliterating frames. This violation of frontiers

is in tension, however, with the meaning of the True Cross legend (or of any typological schema), which is that only when the events of history are isolated, framed off from one another, does the meaning of history emerge. The frame creates significance by selecting from the flow of time. The frame has admittedly disappeared in Piero's cycle. But does it not reappear *as the Cross*? Is not the beholder required to recognize the frame even if it reappears in strange forms? The True Cross divides man against himself, splits cultures and histories into before and after, blind and sighted. The wood of the Cross, rejected as building material, was thrown down by Solomon's builders and instead put into service as a bridge. It was meant to lead the footsteps across the pool of Siloam (in Jacopo da Voragine's account a stream). The Queen sees that this is no bridge, but a barrier, and drops to her knees to pay obeisance to the barrier. The beam divides scene from scene, proto-Christian Gentile from Jew, outdoor from indoor, nature from civilization. Confusingly, the beam will force Sheba to take another route, find another path across the stream, in order to come all the way around, outside the picture field, in effect, and enter the palace from the right.²¹

She appears to worship an aniconic object, as if as an easterner she cannot conceive of worship any other way.²² Her shadow falls on the block of wood, disclosing her psychic "fall" into idolatry, the collapse of self into object. But once we are prepared to see the Cross as a frame, then the scene could be read as follows: she is worshipping an empty frame before the image is put on it, or in it. And in this respect she does not stand for wrongful pagan worship, so much as prefigure Christian worship, which is always the worship of an emptied, unfillable frame. For Christ's absence is real and worship can only proceed by metonymy (contiguity, relics) or metaphor (likeness, images). Sheba represents the past, present, and future of Christian worship on earth. The only worshippers who were not either premature or belated were the witnesses to the Crucifixion. Sheba reveals that Christians who worship relics or paintings are no different from pagans. The fulfillment that typology promises, the filling of the empty frame, will not happen again in this world. Christian worship is always incomplete, and the incompleteness of this or that fifteenth-century artist's work is not a local inadequacy but a structural condition of Christian imagery.

The Persian king Chosras, in an attempt to parody, mock, and unmask Christian worship, made the Cross a substitute for Christ. This scene at Arezzo as much as Sheba's obeisance reads like a parody of the relic-cult. But Cosras misunderstood the metonymic, substitutive structure of Christian worship. He failed to see that besideness (*paroidia*, the song beside) is part of the meaning of the Christian cult. The Christian image always points to the next image.

The Cross, then, stands for the picture-frame, which when empty reminds the worshipper that painting can never replace the body of Christ. When the body vanished, it left behind only (contact-)relics and memory-imprints, metonymies and metaphors. But metonymies, relationships of contact, were preferable to the metaphorical or image-relationship, which is shadowy. The relic is ineloquent, but at least it is real. The Cross is a contact-relic. This creates the paradox that worship of the frame is the truest possible worship on earth. Christ "fulfilled" the Cross only once, promoted it

from empty frame to truth-bearer; all the other apparitions are mere “art”, empty frames. Hebrews 9 had said that Christ’s sacrifice put an end to mere figuration; unlike the sacrifices of the priests, this one was real, singular, once and for all. From this perspective, unfriendly to images, the rest of the history of the Christian cult looks like a fall back into mere imagery. The Cross-frame was a display-engine for Christ’s broken body, creating, momentarily, the one and only true Christian image – well, not quite: although not scripturally attested, the body held in the lap of Mary below the Cross was another. All subsequent images are mere shadows of that original. The substitutional repetition of that first image through long chains of icons does not solve the problem of the *second* image: for what guarantees the move from the body of Christ to the first post-death image?²³

The Cross-frame reappears in the cycle in hidden form, as an intersection of beams or vectors.²⁴ Every crossing of beams recalls that picture-frames are constructed of four beams, crossed at their corners. The True Cross itself was composed of four beams, as Jacopo reports. The Cross appears and reappears, mobile just as framed pictures are. The Cross, a wooden frame, is movable, suggesting the movability of Christianity itself, a religion that is not tied to any place. The frame also suggests the movability of art and offers as the true condition of art its “post-natural” state as a figuring practice no longer tied to place.²⁵

Every reappearance of the Cross in the built environment momentarily contests this version of non-place-specific Christianity and post-natural Christian art. For the crossed beams of stone in Solomon’s palace, where king and queen meet, suggest that wood can be made to behave. The meeting is staged within an un-Roman interior of post-and-lintel construction. The type of building is unclear: is it a palace or temple?²⁶ There is in fact a real archeological ambiguity about Solomon’s temple and palace. These beams, skiomorphs in stone, much too long to be stone, are petrified cross-arms. They defy the magical logic of the Cross, which refused to stay put, changing size every time Solomon’s workmen tried to incorporate it into the building. For that reason it was rejected, tossed into the Pool of Siloam for Sheba to discover. The Cross was a beam that refused to participate in architecture, refused to make the architectural commitment to place. Piero entertains this idea of history by creating a clear, stable image of Solomon’s palace, a thoughtful, well-informed reconstruction. To make such an image of architecture is to “close” architectural history, to freeze the flow of forms. It is what Giotto never did, or only once. Kemp points out that in medieval narrative cycles no one ever bothered to maintain the form of a building from one panel to the next.²⁷

Kemp showed how the threshold functions as a “chronotopos,” that is, a passage in a painting where time and space come to symbolize one another. Giotto and his followers mobilized represented buildings within their pictures as frameworks for the cult. The cult is basically something that happens across a threshold. The threshold divides sacred from profane. Piero complicates this idea by redistributing the frames and thresholds throughout his paintings. His frames are scrambled, dismantled, hard to recognize. The scrambling is the measure of how many layers of reflexion and

self-consciousness Piero has superimposed on Giotto. Piero may try to repeat and recover Giotto's elevated style, but he cannot; he is belated and can only simulate.

Both Giotto's and Piero's cycles, in sum, submit all their time-schemes to thresholdization. They create multiple gradients of before and after, sacred and profane. The time of salvation is cut off from human history; the frame falls between the true event of epiphany and all the subsequent, fallen events bereft of divinity. The time of cult is opposed to the time of art. The true image is opposed to the false. In Piero the cross-frame is the chronotopos that creates all these binarisms.

The painted cycle at Arezzo enframes a real cult practice, creating an inside/outside gradient or threshold between cult and mere art. The frescoes never offer themselves for an instant as focus of worship. They are outside the cult. The frescoes always represent worship running horizontally, as psychologically and logically comprehensible event. They invite no participation. But the cycle also enframes an independent image, a panel, the painted Crucifix, which symbolically represents the frame reunited to its true image. It is an image-type that requires no frame, it just *is* (it is really a sculpture, as noted). The furniture-frame is both structural-functional and representing. Christ, otherwise absent from the cycle, is represented only by his *Doppelgänger* Amor.²⁸ The object deceptively levels frame and Christ to the level of mere representation. Structurally, it is the same as the fresco around it: there is no gap between the image and its support. Both painted Crucifix and fresco are essentially unlike retables, which are frameworks or scaffolds for images, display-machines, spectacularizers.

"Art" is an effect of switching back and forth between frame and framed. Such a switching creates the image *as* text that by definition requires a context for explanation. The image needs the frame as Christ needed the Cross. Both fresco and Crucifix deny this experience, but the chapel as a whole admits it by allowing for a switching between Crucifix and fresco.

The artist's predicament (in art history), which Piero discovered as if for the first time, was not local or modern, but was the problem of prophecy itself. It was the problem of how to receive and read prophetic messages. Art historical prophecy-reading was a postal problem. It was culturally "solved" by print, which over the course of the century following Piero's death completely altered the pace and rhythm of substitutions. Print – engravings, printed lives of artists – created living artists as texts. Print threw frames around them and isolated them from the flow of history in the same way that van Eyck's or Piero's citations of historical architecture or sculpture had created art historical texts.

Notes

- 1 The panel has been attributed to the Master of San Francesco and to Margaritone d'Arezzo; see Carlo BERTELLI, *Piero della Francesca*, New Haven 1992, p. 79, and Marilyn Aronberg LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca: San Francesco, Arezzo*, New York 1994, p. 34. For a reconstruction of the pre-Piero chapel, see Giuseppe CENTAURO, *Dipinti murali di Piero della Francesca: La basilica di S. Francesco ad Arezzo: indagini su sette secoli*, Milan 1990, p. 101 and Taf. XI.
- 2 Wolfgang KEMP, *Die Räume der Maler: Zur Bilderzählung seit Giotto*, München 1996, pp. 100, 143–144.
- 3 Erich AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton 1953, pp. 107–108, 116.
- 4 AUERBACH, *Mimesis* (as in n. 3), p. 120.
- 5 LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 1), reproduces Gaddi's cycle, figs. 6–8, 11, 14, 16–18. Marilyn Aronberg LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca*, London 2002, fig. 79, reproduces one register of the Volterra cycle in color.
- 6 Walter ONG, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982, pp. 70, 130.
- 7 KEMP, *Die Räume der Maler* (as in n. 2), p. 48.
- 8 Lew ANDREWS, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 14–17, 70–71, 98–102.
- 9 Carlo GINZBURG, *The Enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca: the Baptism, the Arezzo Cycle, the Flagellation*, London 1985, p. 26. On the "Greek" quality of the figures in the *Death of Adam*, see Roberto LONGHI, *Piero della Francesca* (1927), Florence 1975, p. 47 (relating the youth leaning on the stick to the "Omphalos" Apollo); and Kenneth CLARK, *Piero della Francesca*, London 1951, p. 32 (relating the youth leaning on the stick to Myron).
- 10 For more on Piero's sources, see CLARK, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 9), p. 33; BERTELLI, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 1), pp. 84–89 and Creighton GILBERT, *Change in Piero della Francesca*, New York 1968, pp. 20–21, Anm. 34, 36.
- 11 LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 5) reproduces the Sansepolcro retable in color, Fig. 156.
- 12 Jacobus de VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend*, vol. 1, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton 1993, p. 278. The story of Sheba delivering her prophecy by post is attested in Jewish and Arabic sources, including the Koran; see Esther Casier QUINN, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life*, Chicago 1962, pp. 82–83. See also the comments in Barbara BAERT, *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image*, Leiden/Boston, 2004, pp. 295–96, 333–48. BAERT is an exceptionally rich source of information about the True Cross myth as well a thoughtful analysis.
- 13 On discursivity and orality in the Arezzo cycle, see Walter SEITTER, *Eine Legende von einem Holz*, in: Dietmar KAMPE/Christoph WULF (eds.), *Der Schein des Schönen*, Göttingen 1989, pp. 476–492.
- 14 Jacopo da VORAGINE, *Legenda Aurea* (as in n. 12), p. 281.
- 15 KEMP, *Die Räume der Maler* (as in n. 2), pp. 100–103.
- 16 Compare Northrop Frye's formula: "every text is the type of its own reading." He is not speaking here of scripture but of all literary texts. Northrop FRYE, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, New York 1982, p. 226.
- 17 KEMP, *Die Räume der Maler* (as in n. 2), p. 102.
- 18 LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 5), Fig. 136. Compare Longhi's description of the *Meeting of Solomon and Sheba*: "abiti che [...] vanno architettando i corpi entro le vere architetture o le finte dei paesi"; LONGHI, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 9), p. 50.
- 19 Piero worked at the Vatican in 1458 and 1459.
- 20 Richard KRAUTHEIMER, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton 1970, pp. 165, 171, 180–188 on the program, according to Krautheimer motivated by concerns about the reconciliation of the Eastern and Western churches. See also GINZBURG, *The Enigma of Piero* (as in n. 9), pp. 26–39.
- 21 In the account of Louis Marin, the Cross is the "operator" of the narration, in the sense that it

- fabricates meaning by articulating oppositions; Louis MARIN, *Opacité de la peinture: Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Florence 1989, pp. 106–108, 115.
- 22 On the philological and historical roots of the cliché of eastern worship of rocks and other aniconic objects, see Milette GAIFMAN, The Aniconic Image of the Roman Near East, in: T. KAIZER (ed.), *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, Leiden, im Druck.
 - 23 The Veronica, the Mandylion, and the Luke Madonna were nothing but attempts to solve this problem.
 - 24 For some examples see LAVIN, *Piero della Francesca* (as in n. 1), p. 57.
 - 25 On the concept of “post-natural” experience and art, which pick up where nature leaves off, see Bryan Jay WOLF, *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, Chicago 2001, pp. 89–139. David SUMMERS, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, London/New York 2003, pp. 23, 53–55, argues that the place-centered art of premodern and traditional cultures is a “second nature” but no less a “real” nature for that; it is the “metaoptical” cosmos of Western modernism, for Summers, that risks illegitimacy.
 - 26 It is basically the same structure that houses the *Flagellation* in Piero’s Urbino panel. But it is also surely based on Piero’s experience of the porch of the Pantheon. On the conceptual and physical concentricity of temple and royal palace in archaic Jerusalem, see Jonathan Z. SMITH, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago 1987, pp. 47–73. The ambiguity is already present in 1 Kings 6.
 - 27 KEMP, *Die Räume der Maler* (as in n. 2), p. 18.
 - 28 On the Amor at Arezzo, see SEITTER, Eine Legende von einem Holz (as in n. 13), pp. 490–491; see also the brief remarks in SEITTER, *Piero della Francesca: Parallele Farben*, Berlin 1992, pp. 109–110.

Figures

Fig. 1, 3, 4, 5: Steffi ROETTGEN, *Wandmalerei der Frührenaissance in Italien*, Bd. 1, München 1996; fig. 2: Hans BELTING/Christiane KRUSE, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes*, München 1994.